MURDER ON THE ROCKS

A MYSTERY JIGSAW THRILLER WITH A SECRET PUZZLE IMAGE

STORY BY ALAN ROBBINS
They heard the scream but didn’t know which way to run. None of them were familiar with the mountains and the sound seemed to come from everywhere at once. They didn’t know about the strange effect of echoes through the trees.

The two State Troopers started off to the left, their pistols drawn. But the third man, the one in civilian clothes, knew better. After three years in pursuit, he had developed a sixth sense about his prey. He drew his own gun and headed off to the right, through dense woods.

When the Troopers saw which way he was going, they followed. Not because they had any faith in him. They didn’t. But if by luck he captured the fugitive without them, it would look bad for them. They weren’t supposed to be there in the first place. So they turned and ran after him, hoping he was right.

Officially the manhunt was over. The Treasury Department had called it off three days before. It was 1934. A storm was brewing in Europe, and the government of the United States had more important matters to deal with. But when the order to drop the investigation came through, the man in the grey suit pretended he never got it.

His superiors may have given up, but he couldn’t. He had tracked the felon, Willie Wayne Sloan, since the beginning. He had followed him across the country, all the way to Poughkeepsie and into these mountains. And he knew that Sloan was close by. He could feel him. Out there somewhere. Running out of time. Panicking. One false move from getting nailed.

Or one scream.

The three men burst through the edge of the timber line at the same time and came to a sudden halt. They gasped at the exact same moment. The forest seemed to have been cut away by a huge razor. Ahead of them now was a rock escarpment like the backbone of a great monstrous creature. Beyond it, the land was gone, vanished. Only the mists of the distant Catskill Mountains could be seen through a dusky purple haze. They had come to a sheer rock cliff, an immense drop straight down to a river winding through the valley below.

But there was no sign of the fugitive. They walked along the ledge for a few minutes, searching and scanning. Finding nothing. The one in the suit held his grey fedora as he walked a few feet from the extreme edge; determination had made him bold. But the two Troopers, with less invested in the pursuit, kept a safe distance back near the tree line.

Then he saw it. Down at the bottom of the cliff. It looked like a piece of string from this height, just a slender meander of rope lying on the muddy soil at the bottom of the cliff. But he knew it was climbing rope and that it somehow led to Sloan. It took another hour to reach the bottom of the cliff by trails through the woods. Unlike Sloan, they weren’t climbers and hiking was the only way to descend. The rope was still there when they arrived, but there was no sign of Sloan. His rucksack lay neatly at the foot of the rock wall but there were no footprints other than their own.

Then the wind came up over the rocks and a chill shuddered through them. The sun ducked behind a low dark cloud. Night loomed. And from somewhere, everywhere perhaps, came a death defying laugh that shook them to their bones and echoed through the deep trackless forest.

“Off belay,” the woman shouted gleefully.

“Off belay,” John Rodman acknowledged.

He could barely see her as she pulled herself into a crevice and disappeared near the top of the rockface. He knew from the start that she would make it. Strong, flexible women like her made the best climbers. They were cautious and could adapt to the changing surface.
The three men were next and Rodman knew they would be more trouble. Men were more likely to try to bully their way to the top. But that meant they could tire more easily, lose their grip sooner. So Rodman tightened his hold on the belay rope and got ready for a struggle.

"Mr. Durrell," Rodman said, turning to the ruddy man standing beside him, "you're next."

Wayne Durrell looked up the cliff and winced. But he said nothing. Even if he was afraid, Rodman thought, he'd never show it. Durrell was a sports promoter, a feisty man. One of those can do types. Rodman knew he'd make it over the summit even if he had to beat the cliff into submission.

"On belay," Durrell said, attacking the first ledge before Rodman had a chance to pull the safety rope taut.

Rodman was right. Twice Durrell fell off the rockface and Rodman had to counterweight him until he got a handhold. But he never gave up and eventually made it to the top.

So did Connie Wilson, a burly man with a boisterous manner. He had signed up once before for a climb and Rodman recalled how arrogant he was. Wilson, the owner of a chain of sporting goods stores, would succeed by sheer will power. He even insisted that Rodman time him to see if he made it faster than the others.

David Axelrod, the quiet one in the group, was last. He was a stocky man in his fifties, with a blunt manner. Without finesse or grace, or any sense of joy, he pulled himself from hand to foothold, and quietly joined the others at the summit.

The competition was fierce. Even Delinda Baker, the woman, had fought to be the first one up. This was all quite odd to Rodman. Climbing for him was a thoughtful sport, like chess. You had to figure your way up the face, plan ahead. Focus on the experience, not the goal. But these people approached it more like naval warfare; full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes.

And this was just a preliminary climb. Tomorrow they would try some rappelling. And the day after, a full blown vertical assault with carabiners and chocks. That was going to be interesting, Rodman thought.

Through his company, Outdoor Venture, Rodman had been running hiking, backpacking, camping, orienteering, and rock climbing outings for years. He loved his work. To him, a few days in the wilderness could restore your soul. But you had to stop, look, and listen. Find the quiet within yourself.

Most people who joined the outings, however, seemed to be looking for something, searching. Executives trying to win respect, or timid types trying to find their inner strength, or New Agers on the trail of hope. Or like these four, cut-throat competitors out for blood.

When the four of them were safely at the top, Rodman made his own way up. Unlike the others, he was an experienced wall walker. They had used the rope as a direct aid, to support their weight when they got in trouble. But Rodman climbed free, only using the rope to catch him if he fell, which of course he didn't.

It was a fairly easy climb, but he did it slowly to appreciate it more. Halfway up, a bird hovered to check his progress. And there was a lovely clump of wildflowers on a ledge near the top. Not that the others would have noticed. The outing to them was some kind of sweaty test of mettle. But Rodman wasn't out to prove anything. He just loved the feeling of climbing, of hanging, of being in the world. The wonderful sense of what the writer John Muir called upness.
There was a crevice at the top, an easy scramble to the summit. But instead Rodman inched over to the side to try some jamming. A thin fissure in the rock wall allowed him just enough space to jam his fists and feet in and haul himself up the rest of the way. Even before he reached the ridge, he could hear the others arguing.

"If I had my way, you'd be lying at the bottom of this cliff. It's a good thing I wasn't at the other end of your rope," Delinda Baker was saying.

"Let's face it, my dear, you're at the end of your own rope," Connie Wilson snapped, as he pulled off his green climbing gloves.

"Don't dear me, you skunk," she shot back.

"Forget him," Wayne Durrell said to the woman. He was having trouble untying the climbing rope. "He isn't worth it."

"How can you say that?" she asked Durrell. "This man stole your wife! Can you just forget about him?"

"That's right, he stole my wife. And he dropped you like a lead balloon to marry her. I admit, I wanted to kill him for it. But I'm over it now. And you should be too."

"Let me tell you something," she said acidly. She was talking to Durrell, but speaking sharply enough for Wilson to feel the sting. "Nobody drops me like that and gets away with it. Nobody."

"So what are you going to do about it? Drop him?" he asked, meaning over the rock wall.

"The thought crossed my mind."

At that point, Rodman poked his head up over the edge of the cliff. The four of them were standing in a circle, facing away from each other, like a human compass with no pointer.

"You people know each other?" he asked, crawling over the rim.

"Unfortunately," Delinda Baker snarled.

Rodman was surprised. They had signed up for the climb separately. He had no idea they were acquainted.

"Do you all work together or something? What's the relationship?" Rodman asked.


"He's managed to ruin everyone's life," Durrell explained. "My marriage, her love life, and David's finances."

"Always looking for a fall guy, aren't you Wayne," Wilson said. "You never face up to the truth. That's why your wife left you for me!"

Durrell had unied the rope and was twisting it around his palms. For a moment it looked like he might use it to strangle Wilson.

"We'd better move on to our first camp," Rodman interjected. "Let's gather the equipment."

"Watch your step," David Axelrod whispered, bumping into Wilson as he passed by.

"Why did you all sign up for the same outing if you hate each other so much?" Rodman asked as they got ready to hike.

"Not each other," Baker said. "Just him."

"It's just a coincidence," Durrell explained. "We didn't know we'd be out here together like one happy family."

Coincidence? Rodman thought. He was no gambler, but the odds of that seemed worse than most state lotteries.

"They really admire me," Wilson said grandly, hoisting his backpack and heading off behind Rodman. "Afraid to admit it. They're just weaklings, all of them."

"Coincidence?" Baker whispered to Durrell.

"It was for me."

"Oh yeah," she said archly. "Me too."
It was early autumn. They were hiking through the Catskills, a chain of low mountains along the western shore of the Hudson River. The chain was fifty miles long and thirty miles wide, covered with a rich tapestry of trees, plunging streams, immense masses of rock thrust up by ancient forces through the earth, distant misty valleys. But to Rodman's dismay, they continued to snipe at each other for the rest of the day, practically ignoring the majesty all around them.

Rodman led the way through the sprawling back country to a spot he had picked for their first night. Suddenly the woods ended, as though cut by a huge razor. Before them was a long narrow escarpment. At the edge of the rocky plateau, the ground vanished. It was a dizzy plummet straight down to a river in the gorge below. Crows loved this ledge for the warm drafts of air. Lovers for the leap. And Rodman for the sheer drama of the drop.

"Beautiful isn't it?" he said.
"It's a killer," Baker said, peering cautiously.
"Perfect," Durrell agreed.
"Notice how neatly the trees line up," Rodman said, pointing back to the timberline.
"Like they were planted there, one by one. That's because of this rock escarpment. The trees grow uniformly right along the edge of it."
"How far to the bottom?"
"One hundred feet maybe."
"You'd never survive a fall," Axelrod said. "You're right, it is beautiful."
"Tomorrow we'll rappel down there," Rodman said.
"Good," Baker replied, "as long as he goes first."

She meant Wilson.
"I'll be happy to, my dear," he said. "If you're afraid."
"I'm only afraid you'd fall on me if I went first."
"God willing," Durrell added.
"Well then," Rodman chirped falsely, "let's make camp!"

Rodman lit a fire as the others pitched their tents around it. He carefully removed the sod and set it aside. Then he dug a shallow pit and set up a pyramid with dried leaves at the center surrounded by twigs, then branches, then logs.

"Where's my axe?" Durrell said, searching his knapsack. "It's gone."
"Here, use this," Baker said, tossing a hunting knife at him. It barely missed his foot.
"I told you not to bring axes," Rodman said. "We're trying to hike clean. Not destroy things. There's plenty of small logs."

"It's not for logs," Wilson said cheerily. "He wants to use it on me."
"Too messy," Axelrod suggested. "Your guts would despoil the natural wonder."
"Oh really?" Wilson asked. "And how would you do it Brother David. Bare hands? You think you have the nerve?"

Wilson was quite a bit larger than Axelrod and loomed over him. The smaller man stood his ground for a moment, then backed off.

"Oh shut up," Baker snapped. "I'm sick of your bullying."
"You're not sick of it, my dear. You love it. You'll be in my tent by sundown, I guarantee it."

"You're right," she said sharply. "I'll meet you there as soon as Wayne gives me back my hunting knife."

"Do you people mind?" Rodman asked. "Why don't we try not talking for a while?"
Rodman lit some paper at the center of the pyramid and blew on the flame. In a few
minutes, the leaves caught, then the twigs, and the fire blazed up. In the morning he would distribute the ashes and replace the sod. Leave no trace. Like the sign in his office said: Take only photos, leave only footprints. That was his credo and most people understood. But there was a kind of emotional pollution as well, and these people were fouling up the landscape.

After dinner, they summoned up the courage to sit around the fire together. Not due to any civility, but strictly because it was quite cold. They were completely silent, which was fine with Rodman. Until a strange sound, equal parts hoot and howl, startled them.

“What was that?” Durrell said. He had been tying knots in a rope. One of them looked suspiciously like a noose.

“That was a goose call,” Wilson explained.

“That didn’t sound like any goose I’ve ever heard.”

“The sound echoes because of the trees,” Rodman said.

“Or maybe it was the wild man,” Wilson suggested.

“Which wild man?” Delinda Baker asked.

“Tell them about it, John,” Wilson said. “Everyone likes a good story.”

Rodman wasn’t going to bring it up. It was a tall mountain tale he usually performed at campfires. But he didn’t particularly feel like entertaining this group. On the other hand, it was better than listening to their incessant harping.

“He lives in the mountains and spooks people,” Rodman said.

“You’re not really going to tell us ghost stories, are you?”

“It’s not a ghost story,” Rodman said. “It’s true. There really is a wild man of the Catskills. Or was.”

“Sure there’s a wild man of the Catskills,” Delinda said. “His name is Buddy Hackett.

“No, this man’s name was Willie Wayne Sloan,” Rodman began. “He was an engraver back in the early 1930’s. He worked for the Treasury Department making the metal plates they use to print bills. A master craftsman.”

The sound came again, more like a high pitched cackle. But this time they said nothing. They were waiting for Rodman to continue. He finally had their attention. So he stirred the fire for effect and slipped into his best storytelling tone.

Except that Sloan began printing bills on his own. Unauthorized ones. But he used the real plates and authentic paper, so they were perfect. There was no way to detect them. But technically they were counterfeit since they weren’t supposed to be printed.”

“Not a bad scam,” Durrell said. “But you’d have to print a ton of them to get rich.”

“Not in this case. You see, Mr. Sloan had a rather unique specialty. He made $100,000 bills.”

“That’s absurd,” Axelrod said. “There’s no bill that high.”

“There was,” Rodman explained. “It was called a gold certificate. The bills were only passed between the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve banks. They were never in general circulation.”

“Why would he print that if no one could use them. Who’s going to break a $100,000 bill?”

“Some people thought that Sloan was working for the Germans. It was the early days of the Third Reich, and the theory was that enough phony gold certificates could actually upset our financial stability. Other people thought it was a large conspiracy of government employees trying to rip off the system.”

“Did it work?”

“Hard to say. They never figured out how many false bills entered the money supply. They were undetectable. The Treasury Department took them out of circulation in 1934.”
“What’s all this got to do with the Catskill Mountains?”
“Sloan became a fugitive here. They tracked him to the town of Poughkeepsie. But he fled into the mountains, taking hundreds of bills with him. There was a manhunt for a while, but they eventually dropped it. After all, we’re talking about ten thousand acres of dense forest, sheer cliffs, hidden caves. It was useless.”
“What happened to him?”
“No one knows. One Secret Service agent became obsessed with finding him and tracked him for years. He even settled down in the area hoping to eventually find him. But he never did.”
“And his spirit haunts the mountains?”
“According to legend, Sloan still lives in the mountains, laughing at his pursuers. And at anyone who gets close enough to his hidden treasure.”
The sound came again. But there was a mocking quality in it, a kind of disdain.
“How do you know all this?” Axelrod asked Rodman.
“Because the Secret Service agent was Jack Rodman. He was my father.”
“Are the bills still worth anything?” Axelrod asked.
“My question exactly!” Wilson said.
“I don’t know,” Rodman said. “To the government, to collectors, they could be worth a fortune.”
“And all buried somewhere in these hills,” Axelrod mused.
“Forget it David, my boy,” Wilson said. “You have no talent at all for holding on to money.”
Axelrod glared at Wilson, struggling to find the words to express his rage. He couldn’t. “Our boy David here is upset about his recent business failure,” Wilson said to Rodman, by way of explanation.
“Thanks to you,” Baker said.
“I can’t help it if David’s a lousy businessman,” Wilson said. “I’m not.”
At that Axelrod got up. For a moment it looked as though he might pounce on Wilson, but eventually he simply stomped off.
“He invented a new kind of athletic shoe,” Durrell explained. “With an adjustable waterbag instep. And he started his own company to produce it...”
“Like a fool,” Wilson interjected.
“...but Connie refused to carry the shoes in his stores. And without the support of Wilson’s Sports, he was sunk.”
“He wouldn’t make me a partner, so I wouldn’t make him rich. That seems equitable to me,” Wilson said.
Another round of accusations began, but Rodman tuned it out and tried instead to think of climbing, and the gorgeous silence of it.

By dawn, the four members of the party were gone from the campsite. In the woods arguing happily, Rodman figured. He smiled about that. He much preferred being alone checking the equipment for the rappel and for the next day’s climb.
First he set out the large collection of chocks. These were aluminum wedges and nuts, some no bigger than a thumbnail, attached to steel loops thin as shoelaces. You wedged them into narrow cracks in the rock and tugged hard, giving you a loop to hook your rope to. Then with an upward tug you removed them as you climbed. They were better than hammered pitons because they didn’t deface the rock surface. They left no trace.
Next he arranged the carabiners, those huge safety pins for hooking ropes together. But he noticed that a few of them were missing. And when he set out the climbing ropes, he quickly saw that one of them was gone too. And so was his map. Something weird was going on, but there was no time to figure it out. The sound that shook him at that moment wasn’t any hoot or howl. And no ghostly chuckle either.

It was made by someone in mortal terror.

“That was no goose,” Baker said, appearing near her tent.

“Unless someone cooked it,” Durrell said, running in from a nearby clearing.

Rodman dropped what he was doing and ran towards the cliff. The others followed, joined by Axelrod. Further down along the rock escarpment, about fifty feet from where they stopped, were some tools and they ran to the spot. Rodman lay down on the rock surface and pulled himself to the edge so he could look over it. At the bottom of the ravine below was a body in a familiar running outfit. It was Connie Wilson. He hadn’t survived the fall. There was a curl of rope near him, and a backpack neatly lying at the base of the cliff.

“What a horrible accident,” Baker said.

“I guess you could say that,” Durrell said, rather blandly.

“His rope must have broken,” Axelrod said, pointing to the frayed end. The other end was tied to a thick tree nearby.

“What the hell was he doing out here by himself?”

“Trying to find Sloan’s treasure,” Rodman said.

There was a map lying near Wilson’s tools at the top of the cliff. It was a terrain map with simple land contours and a fancy border, the kind you’d expect of a master engraver. But it didn’t seem to have enough details to show much of anything.

“Where did he get that from?” Axelrod asked.

“I’m afraid he stole it from me,” Rodman said. “My father gave me that map when he died. It was made by Willie Wayne Sloan.”

“Then the story is true?”

“It’s true all right. Sloan came to this cliff. He tied his rope to one of those trees along the timberline. From the tree he could drop straight down over the cliff. If you knew which tree he used, you’d be able to follow his descent down the cliff face. My father found the map and thought it showed which tree Sloan used. But he never figured it out.”

“And you think Connie Wilson did?”

“He had been on an outing with me before,” Rodman said. “He heard me tell the story and he saw the map. Maybe he did figure it out, and came back to find the money.”

“And was rappelling down to get it.”

“His backpack is down there too,” Rodman added. “He must have lowered it first.”

“I guess he wasn’t planning on climbing back up and sharing the wealth with us.”

“This is perfect,” Durrell said. “He has a lucky break and figures out where the money is. Then his rope breaks. I’d call that poetic justice.”

Rodman was silent for a moment as he studied the whole situation.

“I’d call it something else,” Rodman finally said. “I’d say it was murder!”

Is Rodman right? Did bad luck or something more sinister befall Connie Wilson? Assemble the jigsaw puzzle and see if you can solve the mystery.
THE SOLUTION

"Look at those scarce markers on the rock," Roman said, pointing to a spot near the fishing camp.

"Dane, we need to move quickly," Roman said, "or we could lose our advantage."

"We need to go," Roman said, "before it's too late." Dane agreed. They knew they had to act fast.

"I was pointing to a nearby hole," Roman said, "not to the ocean." Dane corrected him.

"Yes," Dane said, "but you were right." Roman smiled.

"I think we should go," Dane said, "before it's too late." Roman nodded, and they began to plan their next move.

THE SOLUTION PART 2

"I'm not sure I understand," Roman said, "but I think we need to consider all possibilities." Dane nodded.

"We need to be careful," Roman said, "and think about our options." Dane agreed.

"I think we should move," Dane said, "before it's too late." Roman nodded.

"I think we need to go," Roman said, "before it's too late." Dane agreed.

"I think we should be careful," Roman said, "and think about our options." Dane nodded.